

Make for Yourself a Teacher

Baccalaureate Address to the Class of 2005 May 21, 2005, Mead Chapel

The title of today's baccalaureate address, "Make for Yourself a Teacher," refers to a profound and enduring component of the human experience—the role that students and teachers play in the process of learning. The phrase comes from the *Mishna*, which is the body of Jewish religious law used and preserved in oral form until it was codified in the year 200.

The phrase that makes up the title of this talk is in that section of the *Mishna* called "Ethics of the Fathers," which has generated thousands of years worth of commentary representing moral advice and wisdom of rabbinic scholars across many generations—wisdom that has been defined as "spiritual, yet practical," and characteristically contains a contrarian viewpoint that invites more questions and more contemplation about the subject matter under discussion.

The phrase "Make for Yourself a Teacher" adds a distinctive twist to our own received wisdom about the way in which the relationship between teachers and students makes learning possible. Rather than focusing on the devotion and brilliance that allows great teachers to spark a student's mind, the phrase from the *Mishna* illuminates, instead, the talent that students must have for taking responsibility for their own learning, a talent that drives them to seek out guidance from people around them.

Now, why should you, college seniors, who have just completed your undergraduate educations, care, at this moment, about various interpretations and insights about the role of students and teachers in the learning process? You should care because understanding the richness and dynamics of learning as embodied in the roles played by students and teachers is what should give you the greatest confidence that you will succeed in the world as you leave Middlebury.

Through the dedication of a faculty intensely committed to undergraduate education, and to the belief that small scale human interaction is the best way to educate and learn, you have been able to hone a number of crucial skills that will help you in virtually any of your post-graduate pursuits.

You have completed a baccalaureate curriculum that is rigorous and that required you to study a discipline in depth. This in-depth study over a four year period, guided by engaged faculty mentors, who sought to challenge you at every turn, means you have mastered a subject matter and accumulated a body of knowledge that you can claim as your own and use to form perspectives on important issues related to our physical and human worlds.

You have engaged a wide range of subject matter deemed most important by our faculty in the form of course requirements that introduced you to different modes of thinking and different approaches to knowledge. Though at larger schools these requirements are referred to as "service" courses, or "general education," the faculty here view the chance to share their intellectual passion through these largely introductory courses with great enthusiasm. As a result, you have attained a certain degree of breadth in your education, necessary for retaining your self-confidence as you encounter new and unexpected world views.

You have also been exposed to humankind's great diversity through courses that comprise our cultures and civilizations requirement. Our faculty, like our curriculum in general, is highly internationalized. Their deep knowledge and familiarity with the subject matter, and their intense and direct engagement with you, have stimulated your thinking and advanced your understanding of cultures different from your own, as well as provided you with a new context for thinking openly and critically about your own backgrounds and identities.

Through your intense work with faculty you have become skilled communicators, able to articulate, both in written and oral form, arguments to support opinions you hold, based on initial questions, rigorous analysis, and careful thought. Your intensive writing courses demanded multiple drafts, brought critical commentary from your professors, and should now leave you confident to comment on a wide array of complex and important issues, and to communicate persuasively their significance to others.

And you have learned to become excellent problem-solvers, through numerous student-faculty collaborative research opportunities. You have learned how to get at the meaning of things previously unknown to you, be it understanding the texts of Ancient Rome and their relevance across the centuries, or why cells divide as they do under certain conditions. Working side-by-side with your professors has given you invaluable practical experience and insight into how to solve problems, something that will stay with you regardless of the professions you choose following graduation.

These are all outcomes of the intensive human interaction that is characteristic of a liberal arts education. And each of them should give you great confidence as you move from your status as a student to one as an informed and active citizen.

But the real foundation of this confidence will become evident to you as you think seriously about what it means to "Make for Yourself a Teacher." As one rabbinic interpretation explains: "Make for Yourself a Teacher suggests that one does not look for a teacher who is perfect and who matches one's own personality and abilities....Rather, one notes the strengths of the teacher and learns from those strengths, 'making' them your teacher by your effort to uncover what they have to offer."

In other words, making for oneself a teacher is fundamentally an active process. It requires each of us—each of you—to figure out how those around us might have the expertise or talents necessary to fulfill our needs for guidance.

As a teacher, I have seen the process by which students develop the capacity to turn people around them into teachers. The discussion

section in large introductory lecture classes provides a good initial training ground for students to learn how to engage and listen to fellow students. The format of the class provides a natural progression in that the lecture portion of the course has the expert faculty member conveying foundational information to a large group, followed by the small discussion section, where students engage one another, exploring and testing new ideas. This enables the students to hear the ideas of classmates, which begins the process of learning from others.

Advanced seminar classes, taken usually during the junior or senior year, provide another venue for students to learn how to learn from others, and one in which there is far less input from the expert faculty member. Students engage one another with more expertise than before, finding that which is useful and necessary for the deepening of their own understanding of the subject matter through the unexpected insights of classmates. Engagement, disagreement, and the formulation of new ideas and questions occur that, in this learning environment, require the more active kind of learning that is the key component of making teachers for oneself throughout one's life.

And independent work, where students work closely with faculty advisers, either in the laboratory, or on an essay, artistic production, or thesis project, is perhaps the most significant way students learn how to engage another individual as a teacher. The bulk of information and creativity related to the subject is the student's, so the student is learning to seek out challenges to their own expertise, thereby enriching their knowledge.

All of these examples are tied directly to the College's academic program, but the opportunities at places like Middlebury to learn how to make for yourself a teacher extend to the non-academic program, as well. Building organizations from scratch on campus, such as the College's fully student run organic garden; conceiving of, organizing, and running large benefits, such as the recent Relay for Life in support of cancer research; establishing student reading groups, such as Hillel's weekly Torah study; creating new opportunities for cultural engagement, such as the Riddim world dance group; and learning teamwork, such as through one's participation in athletics, have offered all of you during the past four years a remarkable array of opportunities to learn how to learn from others, in these cases your fellow students, making for yourselves teachers a natural part of your life.

Perhaps the most visible campus-wide sign that many of you are already implementing the skills you have been honing inside and outside the classroom is the large gathering that took place in McCullough less than two weeks ago. That meeting, which brought together at least 250 students, was generated by campus protests regarding diversity issues that many found troubling and in need of community engagement and action. Though at times emotions ran high, the two-and-a-half hour collective expression of concern and protest was civil, and the way in which students challenged the president and also, at times, fellow students, reflected deep and honest engagement among those who shared similar and different perspectives, and were willing to hear the differences and learn from them.

It is the intense human interaction that you have experienced here during the past four years that I believe is the essential component of a liberal arts education. It happens to be strikingly rare among colleges and universities in this country and, in fact, around the world. And that is why you are particularly well prepared to succeed in the world: you have had multiple opportunities to seek out the guidance you needed at each step of your education.

So why am I, as College president, so interested in how students learn and teachers teach? In short, I believe educators, and in particular leaders of institutions like Middlebury, should be concerned that they are preparing their students to meet the complex challenges of our 21st century world. That 21st century world places a premium on individuals who have the skills to learn from people who look different from themselves, worship different gods, and approach conflict and its resolution from varying perspectives.

As a college president, I must be concerned that we are living up to the needs and expectations of our society to develop leaders with the necessary preparation for this challenging world. If institutions like Middlebury do not fulfill such expectations, then which will? If not colleges that invest so heavily in bringing together students from around the world and from different cultures and communities from within this country, then which ones?

The need to educate and prepare citizens who know how to engage and learn from others was brought home most vividly by the events of September 11th, 2001. That day came, of course, only a few days after most of you began your college education here, in the peaceful and bucolic setting of northern New England.

September 11th made many Americans more conscious of the huge changes under way in world-wide processes collectively referred to as globalization. While the United States prospered for the good part of the 1990s, ongoing structural changes in the world economy, along with the increased interaction of global cultures and the threat of conflict they posed, went largely unnoticed by most Americans.

Economic relations between states and groups of states were changing; new modes of communication were making political borders porous and weakening states and governments, while allowing rogue groups and even individuals to compete for political authority; science was moving into new areas that challenged previously accepted legal and ethical conventions; and the very meaning of culture was beginning to change with the dramatic increased ease of movement and interaction among disparate and formerly isolated groups.

In the context of the new consciousness forced upon this country by the tragic events of September 11th, and of the resulting demands that the world places on talented and well-educated young people like yourselves, the ancient wisdom of the *Mishna's* pithy exhortation to "make for yourself a teacher" speaks, now, to at least two critical points.

First, it underscores the premium our world now places on and requires of individuals who can learn from people in all walks of life. Increased interaction among peoples from vastly different backgrounds is no longer a choice; it is now a reality, driven home so forcefully since September 11th.

And second, it speaks to the indisputable value of a liberal arts education. Such a human-intensive-focused education is the richest possible medium for students to develop their skills at learning how to learn from others.

As I look out upon you today, our graduating seniors, I ask you to carry the following message with you:

Be conscious of the distinctive character of the education you have received here as you head out into the world.

Be conscious of the deep and growing need our world has for people with your undergraduate educational experience. Having learned here how to "Make for Yourself a Teacher," you now have a moral obligation to continue doing so for the rest of your lives. The world will become a better place for it.

Thank you, and best wishes.

Ronald D. Liebowitz	baccalaureate	baccalaureate 2005	Class of 2005
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